Critical Regionalism

THE ATTACK ON LEVIATHAN: Regionalism and Nationalism in The United States. By Donald Davidson, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 368 pages. $3.00.

In this decade at least three great books have been written about the South and the sectional problem: Vance's "Human Geography of the South;" Odum's "Southern Regions;" and last fall, Webb's "Divided We Stand." To this list must now be added a fourth, Mr. Donald Davidson's "The Attack on Leviathan," a collection of essays on the relation of the region of the United States to the Federal government and to one another.

In order to praise Mr. Davidson's work as it deserves it is not necessary to say that it is the best of these books; but I think it is just to say that it completes them. Where Odum and Vance confine their work largely to descriptive sociology, and Webb to regional economics, Davidson, basing his discussions largely upon their findings, asks some fundamental questions that the strict scientist may ignore, and he thus brings to focus a series of problems that the South, or the other sections for that matter, cannot long neglect without peril to the whole country.

Mr. Davidson's approach to his main question is historical and critical, chiefly the latter: his purpose is to ask questions of all shades of opinion, in different fields, from politics to the arts; and in this procedure he is definitely superior to the authors whom I have mentioned. He knows more than they know —not more facts and statistics, but more history, more literature, and in general he commands a richer and more experienced culture than Webb, Vance, or Odum. In his arguments exhibiting the regional character of our Federation he is able to bring forth from literature not merely tables and charts but the imponderables of American life that the scientific method must ignore.

The key essays are "Two Interpretations of American History" and "Federation or Disunion." The former is at once a brilliant summary and adaptation of F. J. Turner's view of the nature of the sections, and a searching criticism of Charles A. Beard. After applying to the present situation Turner's belief in the reality and permanence of regional differentiations, Mr. Davidson develops at length, both here and in "Federation or Disunion," his leading idea of "sectional imperialism." He says: "Sectional imperialism is in fact the form which disguised sectionalism, operating under the Federal mask, is always likely to assume, and since this sectionalism is certain, in turn, to provoke retaliation and reaction, leading to sectional imperialism under new auspices, it is necessary to declare the Federal government, especially in its later, 'consolidated' form, as one of the chief agents of sectionalism." That sentence, it seems to me, contains more statesmanship than the United States Congress has achieved in two generations. Instead of the theoretical role of sectional referee, the Federal government, in this view, is inherently the tool of oppression of weak sections by strong; and by refusing to face that reality, we make more acute the sectional problem.

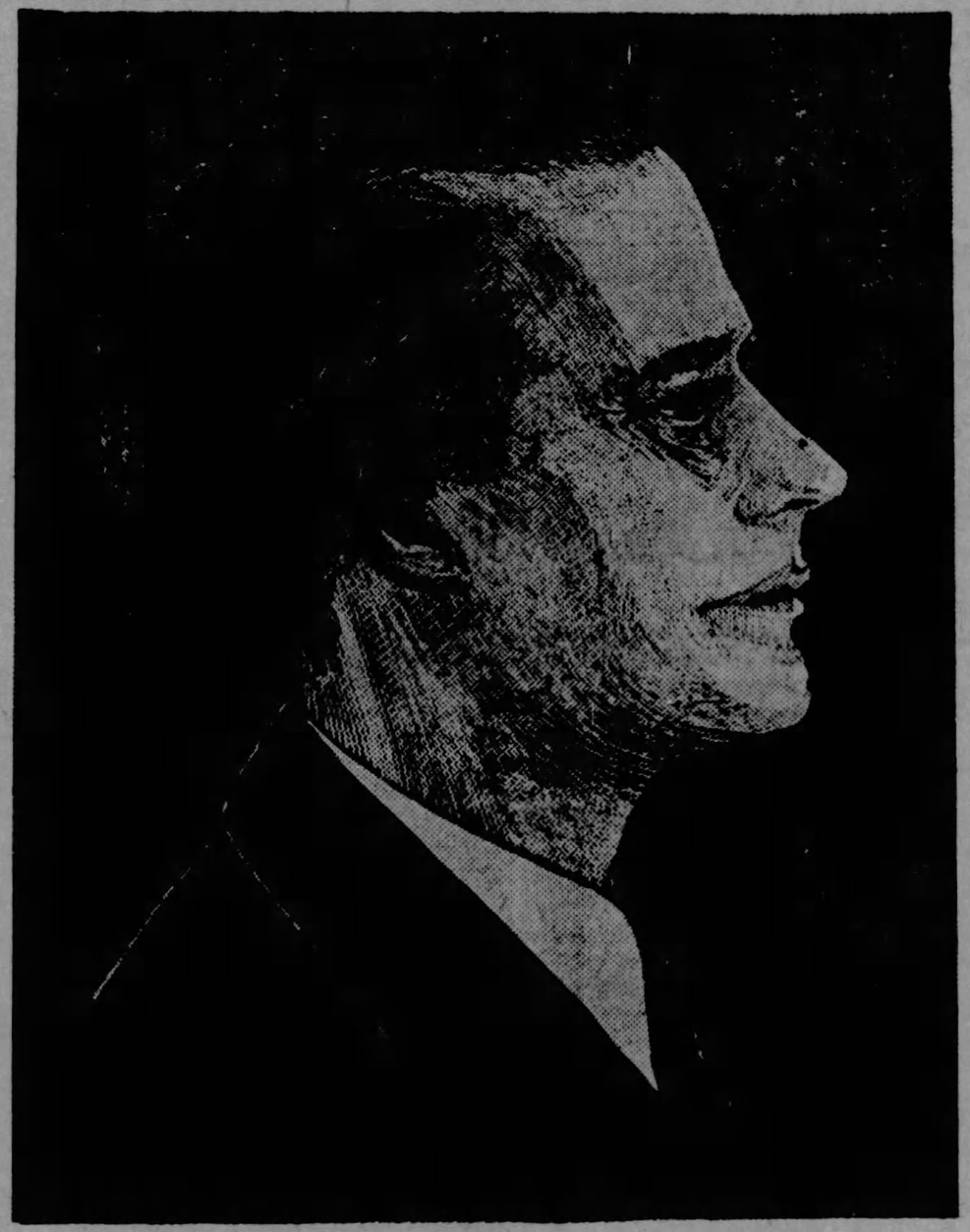
The present center of sectional imperialism is the East, and here Mr. Davidson brings to bear his most brilliant criticism. After contrasting Turner and Beard, he relates Beard's "economic determinism," and his conception of the United States as a consolidated system of Labor and Capital, to the sectional imperialism of the East. And it is just here that Mr. Davidson makes his most brilliant criticism of the school of Odum and Vance. Mr. Odum relies upon the benevolence of the Federal government to "implement" his regionalism, and eschews politics as violent and sectional. Mr. Davidson's conception of the fundamentally sectional charracter of the Federal government shows the futility and the lack of realism in that view. It may be said that Mr. Davidson, who has been identified with a group accused of romantic nostalgia for the past, takes some just pleasure in his ironic exposures of the contradictions and sentimentalities of the "advanced" and "liberal" school of Southern thinkers who have recently dominated opinion in the South; but I hasten to add that his irony is tempered by more than generous acknowledgement of the achievement of the North Carolina social scientists.

For all time, I think, Mr. Davidson disposes of the work and policies of the "liberal" school coming down from Grady and Page. Interpreting Mr. Odum in "Southern Regions," he says: "The South's position, relative to other regions, is one of colonial degradation. In emphasizing that point, boldly and conclusively, Mr. Odum and his collaborators . . . have met the test which distinguishes statecraft from charlatanry in the application of social science. By contrast, Arthur Raper of the militant school, debunkers like H. L. Mencken and Gerald Johnson, and puzzled liberal like Virginius Dabney have all miserably flunked the examination. These latter do not understand, or else wilfully ignore, the first principles of consideration. They damn the South for not repairing its deficiencies; and by way of tonic they offer another swig of the patent medicine that has been costly without being curative. They do not know, or do not care to know, that the debtor South, already ravaged by its creditors, cannot, out of its limited substance, pay for modern improvements and at the same time maintain its creditors in luxury." The luxurious creditors are in the East; and until the liberals of the Dabney sort can deal with Mr. Davidson's diagnosis, they will do well not to mention nostalgia.

I have not done justice to the variety of subject and analysis that this book exhibits. Written from the point of view of Southern regionalism, it is also a guide to regionalists everywhere. There is proof here that a genuine regionalism permits to its people an insight into the culture of other regions, while the Eastern sectional imperialism has developed a contempt for the country as a whole: I allude here to Mr. Davidson's fine essay "Still Rebels, Still Yankees," as subtle a portrayal of a Vermont farmer as of a Georgia planter, and to the "Two Old Wests," an essay of profound insight into the historical reasons for the differention of the South and the Middle West. I have yet to see a piece of writing by an anti-regionalist that commands Mr. Davidson's understanding of the American peoples as a whole.

I have not given any of Mr. Davidson's conclusions and prescriptions, for even with him they are tentative: he does not, like the Southern liberal and the Eastern imperialist, know the answer to everything. His great and indispensable value is his criticism—his examination of conflicting points of view and his demand for coherent policies, not panaceas.

—ALLEN TATE.



Donald Davidson, a block print by his wife, Theresa Sherrer Davidson.

Conservative Poems

AMERICA SINGING — A Yearly Book of Verse. Edited by Loring Eugene Williams. Cleveland O.

This book contains some selections of the best verse written by four score poets. The editor publishes a poetry journal "American Weave" and gleans his preferred poems throughout the year. The current volume seems to be characterized by an elusive, and subtle quality.

Attractively designed, printed on good India bookpaper and bound in full cloth the book is a worthy example of the printers craft. This reviewer cares too much about the effect of the contents, however to be greatly concerned with the trappings.

"Creek Poem" by Woodridge Spears of Kentucky is a bit of haunting beauty. "The Tower In a Fog" by Alice Craig Redhead has an elusive beauty. George O. Butler of North Carolina is represented with "Shantytown." Frank C. Alderman has a charming entry. Daphne Winslow has a worthy page entitled "Pines." Thomas B. Livingstone and Thomas Sossette Lee and Mable Posegate are among the well-known poets also included.

LURA THOMAS McNAIR.

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